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SOUTHEAST ASIA REPORT

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RETURN TO SAMID
RM 1D 384 PENTAGON

24 FEB 66
CHOR etc, 22 Jul 86
DECLASSIFIED Doc
Test Barron, 12 May 89

17358

EXCLUDED FROM AUTOMATIC REGRADING
DOD DIR 5200.10 DOES NOT APPLY

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Date: 8-15-06

THE SIEGE AT PLEI ME

24 February 1966

Hq PACAF

Tactical Evaluation Center

Project CHECO

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Foreword

To insure that actions involving applications of an accepted Air Force doctrines, concepts, and policies are promptly documented and circulated the following special study on the Siege at Plei Me has been prepared. As brought out in the study, it represents the largest air to ground battle of the Vietnam conflict up until that time. The results of the action and the comments of the participants are of significant value in an evaluation in the role of airpower is playing in the current conflict.

It is planned that an overview for the period will be prepared, at which time all such individual actions will be compiled into a single document. The practice of reporting significant actions which demonstrate certain concepts and principles will be continued.

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THE SIEGE AT PLEI ME

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THE SIEGE AT PLEI ME

The largest air-ground battle of the South Vietnam conflict began at sunset on 19 October 1965 with light probing fire from the VC on the Plei Me Special Forces camp. Plei Me is a Jarai Montagnard village in the central highlands of Vietnam, about 25 miles southwest of Pleiku and just 20 miles east of the Cambodian border. It was guarded by four Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) companies and a 12-man Special Forces advisory team headed by U.S. Army Captain Harold M. Moore.

For the next ten days, air power played a key role in breaking the attack. In 696 day and night strike sorties, B-57s, A1Es, F-100s, and F-8s rained 866,300 pounds of GP bombs, 250,380 pounds of frag bombs, 485,880 pounds of napalm, plus rockets, CBU's and cannon fire on VC positions as close as 35 meters from the outpost walls. When it was over, the enemy had lost 326 killed in action by body count, and the camp's defenders estimated that up to another 700 dead had been carried off. This was the largest close air support operation of the war, and perhaps the most effective. ^{1/}

Although intelligence reports ^{2/} presaged a large VC buildup in the area, the small group defending the camp did not know that two regimental sized Peoples Army of Vietnam (PAVN) forces were in position around them. These units, according to a prisoner captured during the action, were the 32nd PAVN Regiment and the 520th Infiltration Group. ^{3/}

At 1900 hours, 19 October 1965, the VC opened up with small arms fire on a Montagnard patrol, followed by the overrunning of a small

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outpost in a clearing below the camp. The PAVN battle plan consisted of classic VC tactics. The following was elicited from one prisoner during interrogation. ^{4/}

Prior to the operation, both units (32nd PAVN Reg and 520th Infiltration Group) assembled and were addressed by a PAVN general from Military Region IV (FVN). He told the units they had nothing to fear because there would be more than enough strength to overrun the camp. Then, the regiments rehearsed the attack for six days. The scheme of maneuver allegedly called for three phases: In phase one, the 520th was to surround the camp in order to bring about a reaction from friendly forces. Phase two called for the 32nd to conduct an ambush of any reaction from friendly forces coming to the aid of the Plei Me camp overland (via the main highway from Pleiku). In phase three, both regiments were to conduct a joint attack on Plei Me, overrun the camp, and destroy all forces therein.

At 2300 hours the 520th Infiltration Group launched its full scale attack on the camp, using 57 mm recoilless rifles, 81 mm mortars, automatic weapons and small arms. The VC did not deviate from their agreed battle plan, except that they failed to reach phase three.

At 2300 hours Captain Moore requested a flare helicopter that had been reserved earlier in the event of an attack. Simultaneously with the launch of the HULB flare/gunship, a C-123 flareship took off from Da Nang Air Base to proceed to Pleiku where he was to pick up the Forward Air Controller. The C-123 arrived on station at 0340, 20 October 1965, and was joined by two A1E fighters ten minutes later. First air strikes began at 0410, and from that moment until the termination of the 20th until 0600 on the 21st, a total of 109 more strike sorties were logged.

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That the enemy was prepared for air attacks is attested to by the large numbers of crew-served weapons observed during the action, including .50 and .30 caliber machine guns. Pilots reported accurate and intense ground fire. An HULB was shot down on the morning of the 20th with four U.S. killed. A B-57 was heavily damaged and was forced to land at Pleiku, and at 0950 on the 20th another B-57 was shot down. The crew bailed out and was safely recovered. Four C-123 resupply planes and flareships took hits from ground fire through the first day and evening. One was damaged and forced to divert to Pleiku, but none were shot down.

Throughout the night of the 20th and early morning hours of the 21st, the camp continued to receive heavy mortar fire and was subjected to continuous probes, and another VC "human wave" attack at 0230, which was turned back by air strikes. At first light on the 21st, an HULB on cover for medevac was shot down ten miles south of Pleiku. Four U.S. aboard were killed.

Meanwhile, the 3 AC TF (Armored Cavalry Task Force (ARVN) had departed the Pleiku area in regimental strength with the objective of reenforcing the Plei Me camp and preventing the enemy's withdrawal from the area. This convoy was composed of about fifty vehicles, tanks, M-113 armored personnel carriers and artillery. A smaller force of two companies of Vietnamese Airborne Rangers (91st LLDB) was heli-lifted to a position 5 kilometers north of the camp and began to work its way in, to give immediate support. It is interesting to note that

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a straight-line flight from Pleiku to their LZ would have taken them directly over the already dug-in 32nd PAVN Regiment lying in wait for the relief convoy. During the over-flight, the regiment did not give its position away. The Rangers moved to within 1200 meters of the camp on the evening of the 21st, spent the night, then entered Plei Me at approximately 1000 hours the following morning. With the Rangers was U.S. Army Major Charles H. Beckwith, who took over command of the American forces in the camp, in relief of Captain Moore.

Heavy enemy fire continued, both into the camp and against the air support. An A1E was downed west of the camp at 0135 hours of the 22nd and the pilot was observed to bail out. He was spotted soon afterward about 200 meters outside the camp, and radio contact established with him. Recovery was impossible at the time because of darkness and enemy fire. (He was rescued 34 hours later by HU-43, with A1Es and B-57s doing pre and post-strike work under FAC direction.) Another A1E crash landed nine hours later and the pilot was picked up by an HULB within a few minutes.

At approximately 0400 on the 22nd, the camp logged its heaviest VC fire to that point. ^{5/} The 520th had found that they could not storm it, but continued to punish Plei Me with small arms, .50 caliber automatic weapons and 81 mm mortar fire. Air power in turn was exacting its heavy toll among them. One hundred fourteen strike sorties pummelled the VC positions throughout the day. Even before dawn, 14 F-100s, four B-57s and eight A1Es expended GP, napalm, CBU, rockets

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and 20 millimeter cannon fire upon the PAVN troops and gun positions. Three C-123s dropped 778 flares to provide illumination during the fighter strikes.

The pattern of the battle did not change until the evening of October 23rd, when the 32nd PAVN Regiment got their chance to institute Phase Two of their battle plan. The 3rd AC TF was seven miles up the highway from Plei Me when the ambush was sprung at 1815.

The ambush, as executed, was initially highly successful from the VC standpoint. The first attack left several of the convoy vehicles burning. Continuous enemy contact was maintained until daylight, 24 October, with the 3rd AC TF receiving fire from 57 mm RR, automatic weapons and mortars.

The airborne FAC in the flareships on station directed 74 strike sorties, with the fighters using napalm, general purpose, frags, CBU, 2.75 rockets and 20 mm cannon in support of the column. "Puff", the AC-47, dropped 25 flares and expended 4,000 rounds of 7.62 mm minigun fire against the attackers. By 0930, 24 October, fire on the convoy had dwindled to small arms, and by 1300 the VC broke contact because of the air strikes. 6/

This last air action apparently broke the back of the Viet Cong battle plan. No further concentrated attacks were launched by them, and ground action in general became cellular. Fire on the Plei Me camp dropped to sporadic harassment and occasional mortar fire, and the number of requests for fighter strikes dropped each day. The U.S. 1st

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Cavalry (Airmobile) arrived at positions on both sides of the main north bound road at approximately 1600 on the 24th. The 3AC TF moved on into Plei Me without incident on the 25th of October, and was joined by the 1st Bn, 42nd Regt (ARVN) on the 26th. Fighter strikes took on more of an interdiction role both day and night in an attempt to block VC withdrawal routes and concentration points, and ground units began search and destroy sweeps around Plei Me.

At 1600, 29 October, the operation at Plei Me officially terminated.

Several items of interest set the seige of Plei Me apart from other air-ground battles in the Vietnam conflict. First, it was the largest single tactical air power engagement since the inception of air support in Vietnam. It provided the most graphic demonstration to date of the ability of applied tactical air to break the enemy's attack.

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Doctrinally, Plei Me proved that there is no substitute for tactical fixed wing air support, under the direction and control of the Tactical Air Control System, providing timely and massive delivery of ordnance to pinpoint locations in support of the ground situation.

Amkward!

The statement, "In my opinion the Air Force has saved this camp. Air strikes outstanding," ^{8/} by Captain Moore, Special Forces commander at Plei Me, is backed up from several sources.

"...VC surrounded the camp and made repeated attempts to penetrate friendly defenses, but ^{9/} were repulsed each time by strike aircraft..."

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"...First night, flareship was requested around midnight, flew to Pleiku, picked up the FAC and departed for Plei Me, arriving on target at 0340, just as VC started a "human wave" attack. Seventeen strike sorties were directed from the flareship before dawn, repelling two assaults and silencing several automatic weapon positions surrounding the camp. One napalm and CBU strike was made within 10 (ten) meters of the NW perimeter, leaving several VC dead near the fence..."10

"...Colonel William McKean, commanding officer of the 5th Special Forces Group, paid a personal visit to 310th Air Commandos (C-123 resupply and flareships) to thank them, '...For doing an outstanding job for the outpost'..."11

"...Captain Harold M. Moore, 24, of Pekin, Illinois, said...'I am sure they saved the camp...because the Viet Cong were getting in the wire we called air strikes on the wire itself, with bombs up to 1000 pounds'..."12

"...The basic air support was excellent. The TACC sent maximum number of sorties available. Practically all preplanned air in II Corps, USAF, USN, USM, and VNAF was diverted and came to help. Response was very good; the aircraft arrived very quickly. In more than one instance we even had strike aircraft 'stacked up' not from over-response, just that we had to use real coordination and precision on each incoming and departing mission. Communication was a problem because of saturation on the various frequencies. I'd say the comm problems were solved simply by good communications discipline, but it was a very busy place. It was the most successful major operation I've seen in eleven months..."13

"...The Plei Me camp was attacked by an estimated PAVN regimental sized force, and with little doubt, would have been overrun had not the USAF been capable of conducting continuous close air support for the beleaguered camp..."14

"...The close air support provided by the United States Air Force to U.S. Army tactical units has been outstanding. The close air support effort as an integrated weapons system...has been responsive

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to all demands. ...a series of extremely important and decisive engagements has been fought. In each one tactical air support played a vital role. The following examples...emphasize the impact of United States Air Force close air support. Duc Co...Phu Cu...beseiged Plei Me...20 October to 28 October. During that period, USAF aircraft received the heaviest ground fire ever encountered in South Vietnam. Despite the intense ground fire, first hand reports reveal that the air support was the most accurate seen to date, with the aircraft conducting their strikes right along the perimeter wire of the camp itself...In summary the tactical air team has provided decisive support as requested, when and where it was needed..." 15/

The centralized control and coordination effected by TACC through all its elements, ALO, FAC, strike aircraft, aerial resupply and flare support made Plei Me the successful operation that it was.

Both air and ground forces learned valuable lessons. The VC, in an effort to counter the advantage of air support - against which they have no effective counter-offensive at this time - are, apparently, beginning to engage opposing ground forces as closely as possible. This is in the belief and hope that strike aircraft will be hesitant to attack because of the difficulties in visually separating friendlies from VC. A VC interrogation report bore this out: 16/

...He decided to surrender after 22 men out of a total of 38 in his platoon were killed. The tactic his battalion used was to stay in close to the camp in order to avoid the air strikes, which were directed at distances of 500 M or further from the camp...

This tactic backfired as indicated in another report: 17/

...Besides using caves and bomb craters for refuge, the VC placed themselves so close to the camp perimeter that they considered themselves invulnerable

[REDACTED]

to air attack. Enemy foxholes were found to be within ten feet of the camp fence. Time and again these foxholes were swept clean by napalm, strafing and frag bombs...

It can be expected that the tactic of close engagement will continue to be used by the Viet Cong, with varying degrees of success, depending upon the local ground situation and upon the command element of the friendly troops they are facing. When friendly commanders become aware of, and confident in, the professionalism and accuracy of FAC/Fighter teams - or when the situation is desperate, as Plei Me, then close air support will be called in to within scant meters of the line of engagement.

Based upon recognition of the Viet Cong's ability to adapt himself to his environment, and to turn disadvantage into advantage wherever he can seize the opportunity, some assumptions can be made based on the Plei Me battle. Viet Cong troops were discouraged and demoralized by their inability to cope with tactical direct and close air support. Air power upset his logistic schedules, turned apparent victory into undeniable defeat, disrupted his communications, and basically took the initiative away from him because he has had no effective way of countering it. The Rand Corporation's interrogation of many prisoners brings this out. 18/

...Since the largest quantitative and qualitative weapon improvement, this spring (1965) has been the expansion of GVN and U.S. air activities, it is not surprising that the interviewees reported the air threat as causing their units the biggest concern and as having a considerable effect on their activities and morale...Among the majority ...two thirds rated aircraft as the most frightening and effective and as the most difficult to deal with...

[REDACTED]

The Viet Cong would like to develop a way to negate tactical air power, or better, turn it to his advantage. In WW II, the Germans developed "flak traps" in which they would position innocent looking haystacks, water-towers, barns and lorries along the natural approaches to lucrative looking targets. At the moment that allied aircraft took the bait and steamed down these approaches, the haystacks would scatter, barn walls fly outward, and water-tower open up so that 20 mm, 40 mm, and 88 mm anti-aircraft weapons could exact a toll in friendly aircraft far out of proportion to the value of the target being sought.

The Viet Cong do not presently have an AA inventory with gun tracking radar and sophisticated airburst weaponry. But they do have quantities of 12.7 mm (.50 caliber) machine guns, and this is a highly effective weapon against low level close air support.

The possibility exists that the VC and PAVN have begun to set "aerial ambushes". In an AP release, Saigon 26 October 1965, Edwin O. White stated:

"The Viet Cong attack against Plei Me and an abortive ambush Saturday night of a relief column was in reality a test by the communists of their ability to deal with American air power during major Viet Cong assaults. On the face of it, the test was a failure."

In line with established VC tactical doctrine, "strike for reaction, ambush the relief", it appears reasonable than ⁺"ambush the relief" *tactic* will include a concentration of heavy automatic weapons, positioned not so much in support of the ground objective, but brought primarily to bear upon the natural lines of aerial close support. In the light of

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considerable damage inflicted upon rugged, fast USAF aircraft during the battle, it is possible the attack was an aerial ambush set not for fixed wing aircraft, but for helicopters of the 1st Air Cavalry. If this is correct and HULBs had attempted the close air support role, it is likely that the damage would have been devastating. 11

If this tactic was designed to bring down enough U.S. and VNAF aircraft and thus achieve a large propaganda or psychological splash, the VC might consider it worthwhile regardless of the loss in their own troops during that battle.

If this was the case at Plei Me, it was not in this instance successful. Tactical air power clearly won the field there, in spite of the most intense ground fire the enemy had brought to bear against it in the four year history of the conflict in the Republic of Vietnam. Food?.


[REDACTED]

THE SIEGE AT PLEI ME

Footnotes

(References as noted provided in Copies 6 and 40.)

- 1/ (C) Msg, 2DASC to 2AF TACC, 65-2382, 30 October 1965 (DOC 1).
- 2/ Ibid.
- 3/ Ibid.
- 4/ Ibid.
- 5/ Ibid.
- 6/ Ibid.
- 7/ Ibid.
- 8/ Ibid.
- 9/ (S) U-55 Rpt 2AD to CSAF, 65-43, 25 October 1965 (extracted portions unclassified). (Not provided)
- 10/ Excerpts from draft of 21st TASS History, 1 July-31 Dec, Plei Me Section, Captain Clemeunt T. Douglas (DOC 2).
- 11/ (U) Msg, CINCPACAF to OSAF Washington DC, DOIPI 934425, 28 October 1965 (DOC 3).
- 12/ (U) UPI release Joseph L. Galloway, Pleiku, 25 October 1965. (Not provided)
- 13/ Interview with Lt Colonel Edsel L. Manning, ALO for II Corps, Pleiku, by CHECO personnel, 5 November 1965. (Not provided)
- 14/ (S) MACV Moneval, II Corps section, October 1965, extracted portion unclassified. (Not provided)
- 15/ (U) Ltr, Major General Stanley R. Larsen, U.S. Army, Commanding General, Field Force, Vietnam to Lieutenant General Joseph M. Moore, USAF, Commanding General, 2d Air Division, 20 November 1965 (DOC 4).
- 16/ (C) Msg 2DASC to 2AD TACC 65-2382, 30 October 1965, Prisoner Interr (DOC 1).


17/ Excerpts from draft of 21st TASS History, 1 July-31 Dec 65,
by Captain Clemeunt T. Douglas (DOC 2).

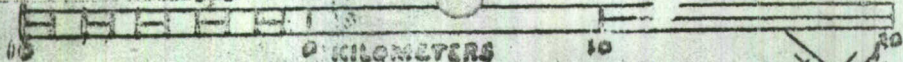
18/ (C) Some Impressions of Viet Cong Vulnerabilities: An Interim
Report by Leon Goure and C.A.H. Thomson. RM-4699-ISA,
6 August 1965. (Not provided)

NOTE: The following documents, although not footnoted, are of interest
to the reader and are included in all documents.

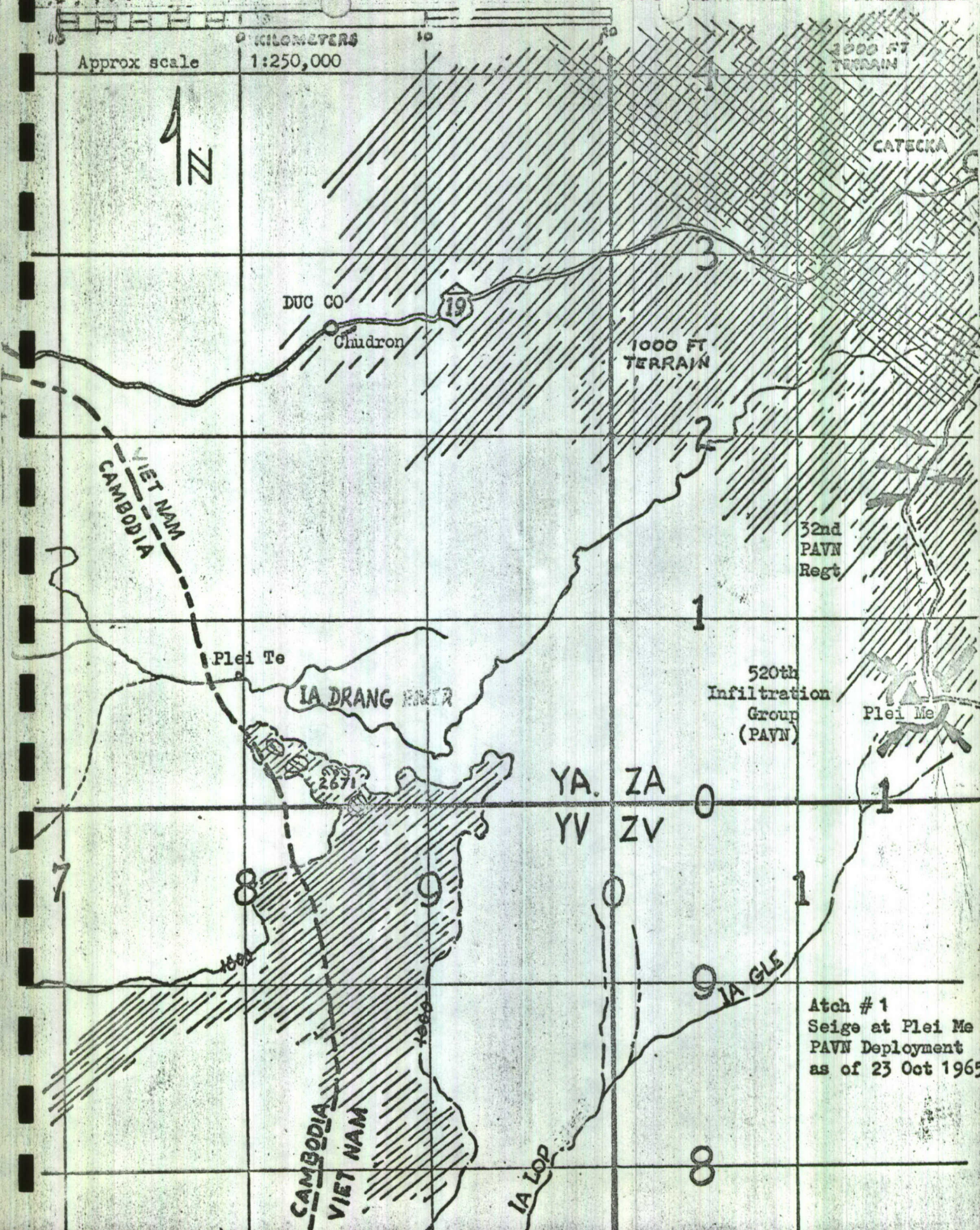
Map showing PAVN Deployment as of 23 October 1965 (DOC 5).

Chronology of Events at Plei Me (DOC 6).

PLEIKU →



Approx scale 1:250,000



Atch # 1
Seige at Plei Me
PAVN Deployment
as of 23 Oct 1965

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SIEGE AT PLEI ME

CHRONOLOGY

191910 thru 280600

- 191910: CIDG patrol received small arms probing fire.
- 192200: Received probe by 20 VC.
- 192300: Began full scale attack 57 recoilless rifles, 81 mm mortar, automatic weapons, small arms.
- 200050: UHLB F/S - Gunship on station.
- 200340: USAF flare ship on station.
- 200410: First air strikes employed (2ALE).
- 200950: HULB show down providing air cover for resupply. Four U.S. KIA. B-57 shot down, crew bailed out, safely recovered. Another B-57 forced to land at Pleiku.
- 202330: C-123 hit by ground fire--not serious. Another C-123 hit by 15 rounds 30 caliber. Causing serious damage. Ground fire heaviest 1000 meters west of camp. Two more C-123s hit by ground fire.
- 210230: VC probed camp, repulsed by air strikes.
- 210430: Heavy mortar fire on camp.
- 210450: Heavy small arms fire along south edge of runway. Five U.S. KIA. Two U.S. WIA as of 210600.
- 210640: HULB crashed 15 miles south of Pleiku, on cover for medevac. Four U.S. KIA.
- 210950: Helilift of 2 AB^N/Ranger companies 4 KM north of camp.
- 211050: CV2s supply drops: first good, second out of camp.
- 211325: Twenty-two AB^N/Ranger company not in camp yet. Having communications problem with camp. Small arms fire Co within 1 KM of camp.
- 211200: Airmobile force remaining 1 KM from camp while air strikes continue.
- 211505: Small arms fire continues, air strikes in progress.
- 212020: Camp under heavy fire from squadron. Air support still in progress. Resupply problems due to enemy gunfire.
- [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

212300: 1 CIDG company in contact with VC.

220135: ALE shot down west of camp, pilot ejected.

220155: Pilot spotted 200 meters west of camp. Patrol sent out. Radio contact made with pilot. Unable to recover pilot due to darkness and hostile fire.

220400: Camp under heaviest gunfire to date: small arms, 50 caliber machine guns, and 81 mm mortars.

220845: Delta teams start steep 800 meter north of camp. Friendly casualties reported heavy. One U. S. KIA, 3 WIA.

221020: ALE shot down south of camp. Pilot rode aircraft to ground.

231100: 1/42 lands safely Pleiku.

231130: 1st ALE Pilot rescued uninjured (Captain Elliott).

231720: Air drops successful. Arrangement made for 5 flame throwers.

231810: 3 AC TF attacked VIC ZA 1717. Several vehicles burning.

231935: White phosphorous attack on camp.

349330: Three AC TF under attack, 57 mm recoilless rifles, automatic weapons, mortar fire, heavy casualties. One VC CIA.

240400: Contact broken by VC, all quiet. Inspection of Duds fired. Several rounds were of U.S. manufacture. No air drops night of 24-25; high winds.

240930: Three AC FT received small arms fire. Elements regrouped and wounded evacuated.

241300: VC broke contact due to air strikes.

241925: Three pallets POL air dropped.

242030: C-47 (PUFF) overhead during night dropping flares and firing weapons.

250400: No VC activity VIC Plei Me, flare ship remained overhead.

250810: A resupply completed. Aircraft received automatic weapons fire on each pass.

251140: Three AC TF commenced moving to Plei Me.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

251450: 2/6 APC received fire at ZA178132. Air strikes followed in this area.

260900: Three AC TF, 21 and 22 Ranger Battalion and 1/42 commenced sweep around Plei Me Camp. Several tunnels discovered.

261300: Camp attacked by mortar fire.

261320: Three AC became heavily engaged with well dug in VC force, 1 U.S. KIA. 7 ARVN KIA. Sporadic fire continued throughout the day.

270845: Operation for relief of Plei Me SF camp continued. Arty battery and infantry battalion closed in to LZ.

271920: Location of units: 3 AC at ZA164066, 21 Ranger at ZA163068, 22 Ranger at ZA161065. 1/42 at ZA161066, no contact.

280630: Extraction of 3 AC, 21 Ranger battalion and 1/42 commenced with Marine TF "A" (1st and 4th Marine battalion) securing route of withdrawal.

281345: Three AC departed Plei Me. Assembly area VIC ZA165160-remained overnight.

281715: 22 Rangers secured U.S. artillery elements VIC ZA185118 and ZA223109.

281730: Two airborne Ranger companies helilifted from Plei Me.

282200: 1 RF company made contact with estimated VC platoon at AR784840.

282345: Plei Me received mortar fire. No casualties.

282400: Operation Dan Thang 21, Marine TF securing withdrawal route for extraction of ARVN units from Plei Me continued.

290830: 21 Ranger, 1/42 Departed area 1 (ZA193192)

291205: 21 Ranger battalion and 1/42 arrive Pleiku.

291600: Dan Thang 21 terminated.

V. Air Support

20 Oct: Total strike sorties 102, flare ship missions 2, FAC mission 9, VR missions 7.

21 Oct: Total strike sorties 102, flare ship missions 2, FAC mission 10, VR missions 2.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

22 Oct: Total strike sorties 114, flare ship missions 2, FAC missions 10,
VR missions 4.

23 Oct: Total strike sorties 87, flare ship missions 2, FAC missions 11,
VR missions 0.

24 Oct: Total strike sorties 109, flare ship missions 2, FAC missions 12,
VR missions 2.

25 Oct: Total strike sorties 48, flare ship missions 2, FAC missions 12,
VR missions 2.

26 Oct: Total strike sorties: 39, flare ship missions 2, FAC missions 9,
VR missions 7.

27 Oct: Total strike sorties 44, flare ship missions 2, FAC missions 7,
VR missions 5.

28 Oct: Total strike sorties 6, flare ship missions 2, FAC missions 4,
VR missions 7.

[REDACTED]